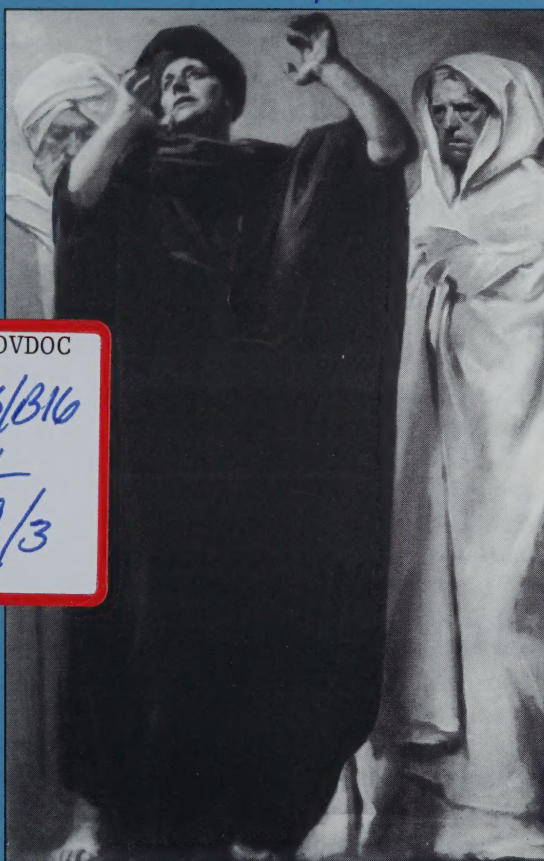


John Singer Sargent's

Triumph of Religion

at the Boston Public Library

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John Singer Sargent's *Triumph of Religion* at the Boston Public Library

John Singer Sargent (1856-1925) is best known today as a painter of brilliant society portraits. In 1890, however, he embraced the opportunity to prove himself at mural decoration, a genre he and his era judged superior to portraiture. *Triumph of Religion* (1890-1919; see fig. 1) was Sargent's first and most complex mural program; it was also the work he hoped to make his masterpiece. If the Boston Public Library, in the words of Sargent's contemporaries, was the city's "shrine of letters," the library's special collections on the third-floor most firmly established this reputation. Here literate Boston stored and consulted the books and documents that constituted its most "sacred" intellectual treasures. Here, in the entry hall to these riches, Sargent would paint his *Triumph of Religion*.

Given its public context, the subject Sargent selected may initially seem odd or even inappropriate. In its own time, however, Sargent's approach to religion was quintessentially modern, democratic, and American. Religion's triumph, according to the artist, was precisely the privacy of modern belief. Sargent grounded his mural cycle in an ideal fundamental to American religious liberty: the conviction that religion is an interior matter, to be determined solely and freely by the individual. Moving from materialist superstition in the "pagan gods" on the north ceiling vault, to fossilized dogma in the medievalizing images on the south wall, to an enlightened spirituality of the heart, the artist recast contemporary religion, linking it not with such external factors as institutions or creeds but with personal subjectivity. For Sargent this ideal was a sign of Western, especially American, progress. This is the notion of religion's "triumph" that he planned to depict in *Sermon on the Mount*, the never-completed "keynote" panel, destined to fill the large vacant space that remains above the stairwell. In *Triumph of Religion*, the Hebrew prophets signaled the emergence of religious subjectivity as *Sermon on the Mount* would signal its distilled expression.

Consistent with its location in a public library, Sargent's mural cycle represented the *study* of religion rather than religion's practice. The artist deliberately ordered the room and its decoration to create an educational space, not a devotional one. Among his chief efforts in this

regard was his decision to make the long east wall his focus. This would insure that while the initial impression of the room might be that of a chapel, with the first view from the stairs showcasing the south wall's *Dogma of the Redemption*, visitors would soon discover that the artist's narrative had reconfigured the space to accent the short east-west axis rather than the long north-south one. This meant that the room itself, as orchestrated by Sargent, now resembled a lecture hall or schoolroom rather than a chapel.

In keeping with this educational motif, Sargent's *Triumph of Religion* took up a subject of intense scholarly interest and debate. Contemporary experts in many fields charted the "evolution" or "progress" of Western civilization in terms very similar to the ones that Sargent employed, often mapping the story of cultural development with reference to religion. Sargent thus allied himself, in his conception of *Triumph of Religion*, with informed scientific opinion, allowing the thinking of Ernest Renan, James Frazer, and William James, for example, to participate in shaping his art. As an artist Sargent was interested not only in the works of literary, scientific, and philosophical luminaries, but also in the painted and sculpted masterpieces of Western culture—and in literally bringing culture to Boston. He constructed his visual narrative by assembling versions of recognizable artifacts from abroad. Never content to simply copy, he radically revised the materials he "collected," using the artistic treasures of the past to create a pictorial story of particular significance to modern Boston and its celebrated library.

When observers called the library a "shrine of letters," they linked spiritual and intellectual enlightenment. Reiterating this cultural sanctification of education, Sargent's *Sermon on the Mount* and the painting immediately above it, *Israel and the Law*, would present their protagonists, the "Jewish" God and the "Christian" Jesus, as teachers. At the artistic focus of the room (along this central axis of the east wall), Sargent would assert the similarities between Judaism and Christianity rather than their differences. He established this kinship by creating unique variations of a set of specific artistic precedents—most notably, paintings by Michelangelo, Raphael, and Cosimo Rosselli in the Sistine Chapel and other Vatican chambers. In *Israel and the Law* Sargent reworked the conventional iconography of the Lawgiving on Mount Sinai. In Sargent's rendering, the recipient of the Law is not Moses but the child Israel and the

action in the image is not the solemn handing over of stone tablets but an intimate moment in which God is engaged in *teaching* the child from a scroll.

The artist's parallel introduction of a child to the iconography of *Sermon on the Mount* (see fig. 2) underscored the innovation. While children had appeared in earlier representations of this scene, they did so not as individuals but as part of a crowd. Sargent's picture differed from all others in his insertion of a child not as one of many but in immediate proximity to and attentive contact with Jesus. In the case of these two Sargent compositions (*Israel and the Law* and *Sermon on the Mount*) the introduction of the child transformed the activity represented. God became a teacher rather than a stern dispenser of regulations; Jesus would appear below him, not as preacher but as teacher too. In the educational space of the library, this was a significant alteration: a mysterious but tender God and a very human Jesus would take up their places at the front of the lecture hall Sargent had designed.

But Sargent never painted *Sermon on the Mount*—and, while other factors figured in, the principal reason for his abandonment of this important project was surely the controversy that arose immediately following the 1919 installation. To communicate his idea of the demise of all external expressions of religion, including religious institutions, Sargent made an unfortunate and misinformed choice. As the contrasting “frame” for his central paintings of *Israel and the Law* and *Sermon on the Mount*, he selected *Synagogue* and *Church*, a conventional medieval artistic iconography with an antisemitic past. Sargent's point was to rework the problematic convention and to establish for it a new and current content. He would use the allegorical pair to represent the *joint* obsolescence of the two institutions. Rather than *Synagogue* yielding before *Church*, Sargent's cycle relegated both to a distant religious past—but this was not evident to many in his Boston audience who spoke eloquently and persuasively against the two paintings. Sargent, an intensely private person, failed to understand his detractors and defended himself by repeating that his choice represented the “point of view of iconography,” that it rested in artistic precedent and not in religious bias.

From Sargent's perspective, the attack on the paintings must have had an essentially hidden and powerful private resonance. Both *Synagogue* and *Church* were closely related to his own devastating experiences of the

First World War. In 1918, he traveled to the front to make studies for a major war painting. Upon his return, he worked simultaneously on his final version of *Synagogue* and on the enormous war image he called *Gassed*. Because the victims of mustard gas were blindfolded to protect their eyes, both *Gassed* and *Synagogue* depicted blindfolded individuals. When Sargent described *Synagogue* for a library publication, he referred not to her blindfold but to her "bandage." His principal artistic source for *Synagogue* (Michelangelo's *Cumaean Sibyl*) also connected Sargent's picture to themes of war and mortality.

Likewise, the artist's association of *Church* with obsolescence and death went beyond the figure's unseeing stare and the lifeless body of Christ in her lap. Over and over, Sargent asserted that he had turned to the medieval sculpture of cathedrals like Reims for the pairing of *Synagogue* and *Church*. In the years of combat, the cathedral at Reims was under almost constant bombardment. In 1918, while Sargent was at the front and as he was making final plans for his painting of *Church*, the sculpture of *Church* at Reims was completely demolished by enemy fire. But it was not just the military destruction of Western cultural heritage that preoccupied Sargent as he created this painting. The artist had suffered a far more personal loss. His beloved niece and model, Rose-Marie Ormond Michel, had been killed in the bombing of the Catholic church of Saint-Gervais in Paris in March of 1918. Perhaps unconsciously, Sargent used Rose-Marie's features, broadly treated, for the face of his painted *Church*. He thus connected the tragedy of his young niece's war-time death with the institution and the building (a church) in which she literally died. The mural panel became a funerary image for Rose-Marie and, through its connections to the sculpture of *Church* at Reims, for Western culture. These meanings (*Synagogue* in relation to *Gassed* and the *Cumaean Sibyl* and *Church* in relation to Reims and Rose-Marie) complicated the two paintings' presence in *Triumph of Religion*. No longer a "simple" medieval notation fading into the background "behind" *Sermon on the Mount*, each now contained disarmingly personal references.

While the controversy over the 1919 installation was the principal factor in Sargent's abandonment of his project one painting short of completion, the war had already arrested the momentum of the cycle's optimistic content. Before the war, the progress Sargent imagined from superstition and materialism to subjective spiritual-

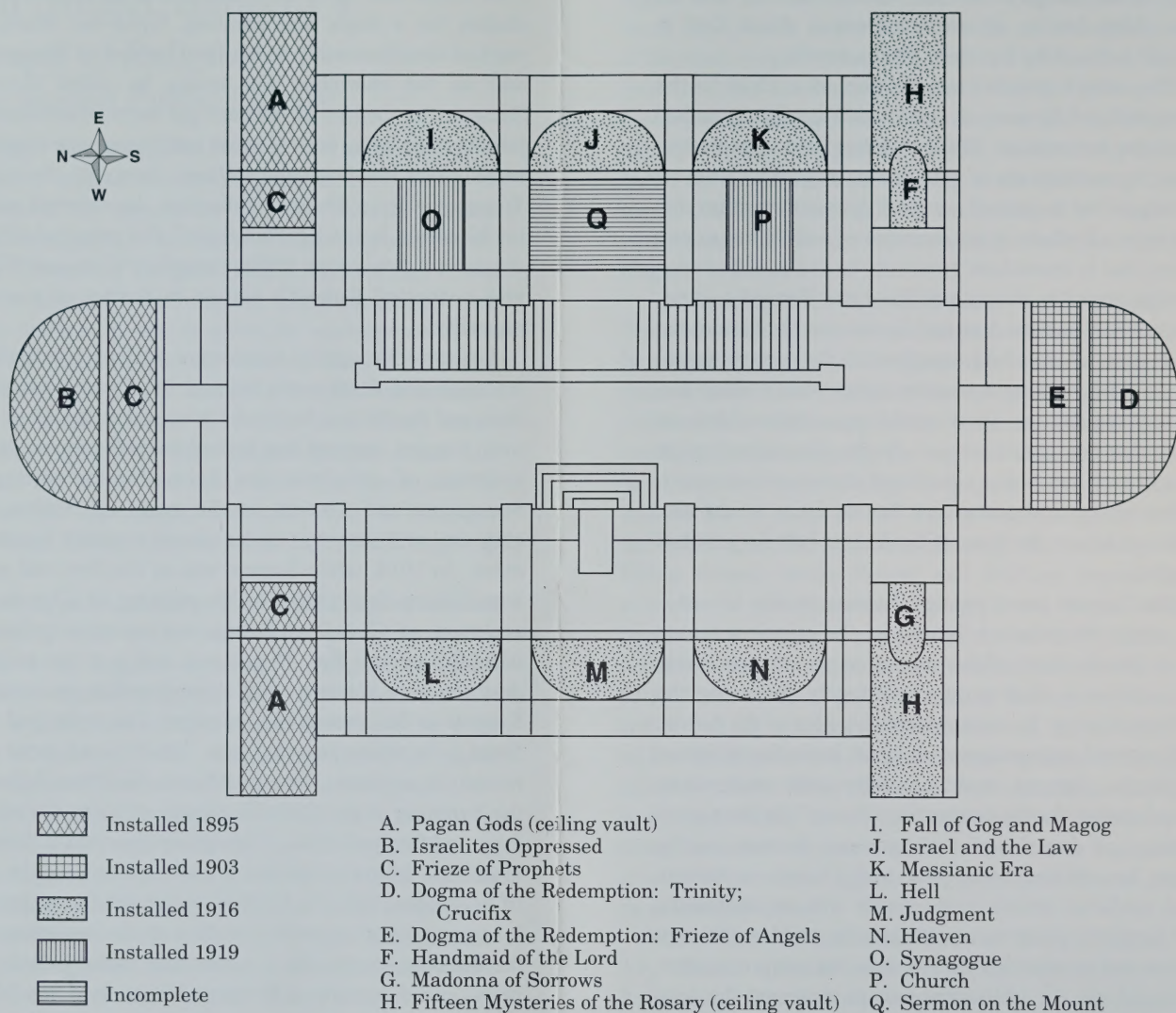


Fig. 1. Diagram of John Singer Sargent's mural program *Triumph of Religion*, showing location of individual panels and order of installation. Courtesy of Sally M. Promey

ity was one many could confidently endorse. In this scheme, morality and higher values were matters of self-control, not deference to institutions, codes, or hierarchies. The war introduced a strong dose of ambiguity, challenging assumptions about the degree to which moral behavior could actually be internalized. If the late nineteenth century had been an age of religious doubt and secularization, commented Boston bishop Charles D.

Williams, the post-war years were an age of "disillusionment," the "bitter fruit of the shattering experience of the world war."

Despite its incompleteness, *Triumph of Religion* stands as a monument to Sargent's complex visual intelligence, his commitment to the American city he loved, and his great hopes for Boston's "shrine of letters": the public library on Copley Square.

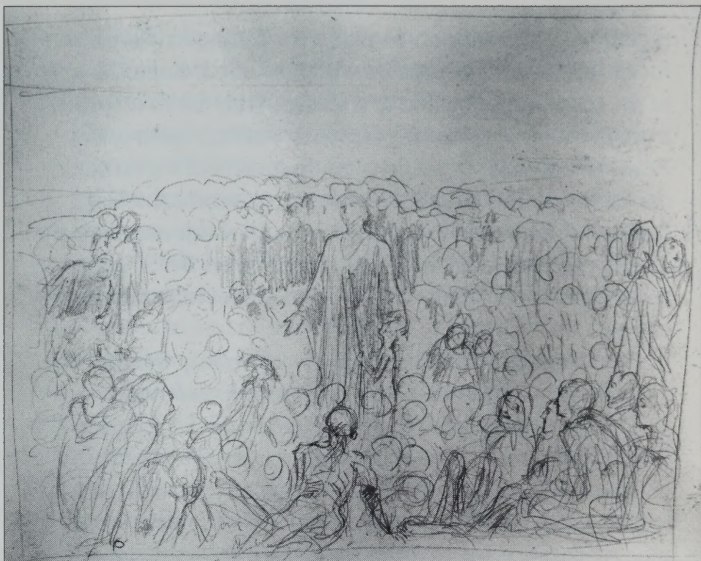


Fig. 2. John Singer Sargent, *Preliminary Sketch for Sermon on the Mount*, recto. Courtesy of the Boston Public Library, Print Department, Gift of Miss Emily Sargent and Mrs. Francis Ormond

For further reading, see:

Sally M. Promey, *Painting Religion in Public: John Singer Sargent's "Triumph of Religion" at the Boston Public Library*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999.

Elaine Kilmurray and Richard Ormond, eds. *John Singer Sargent*. With essays by Richard Ormond and Mary Crawford Volk. Exh. cat. London: Tate Gallery; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998.

Cover:

John Singer Sargent, *Frieze of the Prophets* (1895), detail, Boston Public Library.

Text and Diagram by Sally M. Promey